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Jan. 25, 2001
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NEWS RELEASE

IN NEW BOOK, UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON PROFESSOR REFLECTS ON 'THORNY ISSUES' IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

DAYTON, Ohio — The questions come up in conversations with pastors, lay ministers, counselors and theology teachers.

They're tough questions — about sexuality, divorce and remarriage, priestly celibacy and women's ordination — with answers that can leave committed Catholics caught between the rock of official church teaching and the hard places in their own lives.

William Roberts, a religious studies professor at the University of Dayton, walks prayerfully into that gap to offer approaches that may open dialogue in his new book, *Thorny Issues: Theological and Pastoral Reflections* (\$18.95, Nova Science Publishers).

The book, due out in early February, focuses on seven issues: sexual integrity, divorce and remarriage, homosexual orientation, mandatory priestly celibacy, women's ordination, abortion and the papacy.

"Some of these questions have been burning inside me for 35 years," he said. The book was sparked, in part, by "much of the work I have done on marriage and on women's issues as they relate to marriage," said Roberts, author, editor or co-editor of 11 previous books, including *Partners in Intimacy: Living Christian Marriage Today*, written with his wife, Challon O'Hearn Roberts.

Roberts' purpose isn't to rehash old arguments. "This book is rooted in complete faith in all dogmas of the church," he said. "I'm talking about some of the practical conclusions that have been drawn."

Writing from the perspective of more than 40 years of doing systematic theology and working in pastoral ministry, he reflects on the topics in their broader theological, pastoral and spiritual contexts.

For example, rather than viewing the issue of women's priestly ordination only from the perspective that it has never been allowed and that maleness is required to represent Christ, Roberts suggests looking at the question in the light of the meaning of baptism. "All the

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baptized are images of the risen Christ and the one God who transcends all gender," he writes.

Is it possible that church teaching on homosexual orientation may develop beyond its present stance? Roberts walks a carefully reasoned line, treading between church teaching and history, finding examples where the church has reversed positions on usury, slavery and religious freedom, among other issues.

"Deeper understanding, under the guidance of the Spirit, of human personhood, of the human experience and the realities of life ... clamors for a rethinking of the appropriate ecclesial response to complex situations," he says. "Does this mean everything is up for grabs? Absolutely not. But it does mean that when insights in regard to some human behavior have undergone dramatic development, it becomes a theological responsibility to raise some new questions."

Among his points: lifelong celibacy is a vocation to which only a small percentage of heterosexuals are called. "It is unrealistic and unfair to expect and demand 'under pain of mortal sin' that all persons who through no choice or 'fault' of their own are of homosexual orientation must embrace lifelong celibacy, a state which the vast majority of heterosexuals find impossible to maintain," Roberts says. The best solution is acceptance of committed, permanent relationships for homosexuals not called to celibacy, he says.

In the chapter on divorce and remarriage, he proposes that "a balance can be achieved between maintaining a strong commitment to the ideal of the permanence of marriage, and ministering in a Christlike way to those whose marriages have been broken and who yearn for the healing grace of a second chance."

By emphasizing other approaches, Roberts hopes to fill the vacuum experienced by "many people in pastoral and teaching positions [who] cannot in conscience teach the church's view so they avoid it entirely." His discussion on the spirituality of sexual integrity, for example, opens a way for teachers to discuss masturbation, premarital sex and artificial contraception and "escape the kind of obsessiveness with 'sexual sins' that marked the past." He hopes the book "will help parents, teachers and youth ministers to avoid treating sexual matters in isolation from the rest of the gospel mandate. It will guide them in giving the topic of sexual activity the emphasis in the New Testament, no more, no less."

Roberts admits, "There's something in this book for everyone to hate. I'm hoping that the thoughtful and respectful way in which I try to do this and the fact that this has grown out of 40 years of doing theology will give more credibility to the questions that I think need to be addressed on these issues by the official church."